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This is a study of educational, occupational, and income aspirations as they are related to social class. It was assumed that individuals have a range of aspirations rather than a single level of aspiration. Research has indicated that lower class individuals have a lower level of aspiration than middle class individuals. It may be, however, that although the lower class has the same peak of aspirations, they also have a larger range of aspirations, including a lower base. Thus, on single response questionnaires, they may appear to have a lower level of aspiration. Parents of Negro children enrolled in Head Start were interviewed with regard to their aspirations for the education, occupation, and income of their children. It was found that the social class of the parents was inversely related to the width of the range of aspirations but that the peak of the lower class was the same as that of the middle class. (WD)

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Social Class and Parent's Aspirations for Their Children*

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Social Class and Parent's Aspirations for Their Children* †

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This is a study of educational, occupational, and income aspirations as they are related to social class. A basic assumption underlying the research is that individuals have a "range of aspirations" rather than a single "level of aspiration." Approaching the study of aspirations from this perspective opens up new interpretations of research that has already been done, and suggests important new ways of collecting data.

Previous research in this area has focused almost exclusively upon a single level of aspiration. Respondents are asked a question which requires a single response, e. g. "How far do you hope to go in your schooling?" The data resulting from such questions indicate that lower-class individuals have a lower level of aspiration than middle-class individuals.

However, another interpretation of these findings is possible. Lower-class individuals may have a wider range of aspirations than middle-class individuals--the lower-class peak may generally be as high as the middle-class peak, but the lower-class base may be lower. If this is so then by chance alone it would appear that lower-class individuals have a lower level of aspiration than middle-class individuals, because they must select their single response from within a range that stretches lower than the middle-class range.

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* The research reported here was supported in part by OEO Head Start Subcontract #4118 with Michigan State University Head Start Evaluation and Research Center, 1967-68.

† This draft deals only with a limited number of operational definitions of a range of aspirations. Further work is currently underway on additional measures of a range of aspirations. This work will be incorporated into the final draft of this paper.

This paper tests the extent to which parents in different social classes do have a range of aspirations for their children as opposed to aspiring to only one level of education, income, or occupation. The basic hypothesis to be investigated is that within the lower class there will be a wider range of aspirations than in the middle class.

A major problem within the lower classes is the difficulty, due to poor resources, of being able to achieve in accordance with the dominant, middle-class values of society. What happens as a result of this problem? The members of the lower class could retain the middle-class values (or aspirations) without change, even though they are often not able to live up to them; they could abandon the middle-class values as inappropriate to their life situation, and develop an alternative and completely different set of values; or they could react pragmatically by completely shedding the importance of values in a particular area. Yet another alternative--and the one which gives rise to the basic hypothesis being investigated--is that one response of the lower class is to "stretch" the societal values, such that they have a greater range of values, and a lesser degree of commitment to each level of that range. Thus, the middle-class values are retained and "stretched" downward so that lesser degrees of achievement and alternate forms of behavior will be valued. In the area of aspirations, a lower-class person would therefore be expected to aspire to a wider range of occupational, educational, and income levels than a middle-class person.

The first formulation of the lower-class value stretch hypothesis was discussed in "The Lower-Class Value Stretch" along with its relevance to data on illegitimacy in the Caribbean, and data on the level of aspiration.[1] Support for the hypothesis in the area of illegitimacy in

the Caribbean was presented in "Illegitimacy in the Caribbean Social Structure: A Reconsideration."[2] Data on 176 respondents from Trinidad indicate that many members of the lower class do "stretch" their values so that both marriage and the non-legal marital union are part of their normative system. Moreover, the study documented the inverse relationship between social class status and the normative acceptance of both legal marriage and the non-legal marital union.

The concept of the "level of aspiration" has been used in several types of studies. For example, there is a large body of psychological experiments dealing with the level of aspiration. A great number of tasks have been used with many different measures of the level of aspiration. But almost all of the experimental work is limited by an underlying (but unstated) assumption that subjects have a single level of aspiration. It is only recently that aspiration measures have been used which are based upon an awareness of an underlying range of aspirations. The work of Crandall, Katkovsky, and Preston, and of Battle, based upon Rotter's construct of a "minimal goal", is most closely related to the kind of approach we are proposing.[3]

The sociological research on aspirations has also been restricted in the same way. For example, Herbert Hyman has carried out a comprehensive secondary analysis of survey data regarding class differences in levels of aspiration and concluded that the members of the lower classes have lower aspirations than the members of the middle class.[4] However, when we examine Hyman's study closely, we find that in every question (from every survey) that he used in his analysis, the respondent was asked for only one response. More recent studies indicating the inverse relationship between social class and level of aspiration have been referred to by Sewell and Shah.[5]

Some earlier writers have discussed the concept of "a range" in the area of aspirations and the area of social norms. Lewin et al., distinguished between an "ideal goal" and an "action goal": "Setting the action goal does not mean that the individual has given up his ideal goal."[6] Stouffer has suggested that a social norm be regarded as a range rather than as a single point.[7] However, these theoretical writings which implied or directly stated that we were dealing with "range" phenomena have rarely been heeded.

Some data relevant to the range of aspirations concept have been reported. Empey, Stephenson, and Caro, among many others, have made use of the distinction between aspirations and expectations.[8] The area between the level of aspiration and the level of expectation can be said to constitute "a range"; but of course, as the above authors are aware, this is neither a range of aspirations nor a range of expectations, but a measure of discrepancy between aspiration and expectation. The studies indicate that members of the lower class (as measured by the occupation of the father) have lower aspiration levels, lower expectation levels, and a larger discrepancy between aspiration and expectation.

Another study by Caro measured the desirability of high and medium prestige occupations to middle and working class high school students.[9] The results showed that working class students considered the medium prestige occupations more desirable and high prestige occupations less desirable than the middle-class students did. Thus, the middle-class students made a greater distinction between the occupational levels than the working-class students; the latter were more equally satisfied with high or medium prestige occupations.

These studies show that social class is an important variable in the area of aspirations. They are also compatible with the basic question we are concerned with--the existence of a wider range of aspirations in the lower class; or more generally, the inverse relationship between social class level and the width of the aspiration range. Lower expectation levels, lower aspiration levels, and a larger discrepancy between aspirations and expectations in the lower class can be interpreted as follows: lower expectations (based on lower levels of achievement) lead to a downward stretch in the range;[10] lower aspiration levels are found because the single responses are given from within that wider range; and the discrepancy is greater because aspirations near the top are not necessarily sloughed off despite the lower levels of expectation.

METHODOLOGY

In the fall of 1966 parents of 255 Negro kindergarten and preschool children were interviewed as part of the Head Start Evaluation and Research Program in Detroit, Michigan. The children were selected to participate in one of several research projects and the parents were then interviewed regarding a variety of subjects including their aspirations and expectations for their children in the areas of education, occupation, and income. Three samples of children were selected. In all 3 samples the following criterion was used to select children according to their social class background: In order for a child to be chosen as lower class it was necessary that neither parent had gone beyond high school in his education. For children selected as middle-class both parents must have finished high school and at least one parent must have gone beyond high school.

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The first sample of 115 children was selected from 5 inner-city kindergarten classrooms which had been suggested by the Detroit Board of Education as having teachers receptive to having research done in their classrooms. Only lower-class children were selected for this sample. The education of the parents was ascertained by going through the school records. For the second sample, 40 - 2 1/2 year old children were selected from returns to letters sent to parents whose names had appeared in the newspaper birth listings two years previously. A third sample of 100 - 3 1/2 and 4 1/2 year old children were selected from 5 Head Start classes and 7 private nursery schools.

Interviews were conducted with 436 parents of the 255 children. Of these, 239 are mothers, 174 are fathers, and 23 are other relatives including grandparents and stepparents. All respondents except 14 fathers lived in the household with the child. The social class of the parents according to the Hollingshead Two Factor Index of Social Position[11] is distributed as follows:

Class I	14
Class II	34
Class III	41
Class IV	159
Class V	188
	436

RESULTS

The range of aspirations of parents for their children's education was measured by the following question: "Now I'd like to know how happy or unhappy you would be in each of the following situations. How would you feel if your child stops school after finishing the 6th grade?" A card was shown with the following categories: 1--very happy; 2--a little happy; 3--neither happy nor unhappy; 4--a little unhappy; 5--very unhappy.

This question was repeated for each of the following educational levels: 9th grade, 12th grade, 2 years of college, 4 years of college, and more than 4 years of college.

The responses have been categorized according to two criteria: the highest level at which the respondent would be happy (categories 1 and 2) and the range or pattern of the levels with which the respondent would be happy. The levels have been grouped as follows: I--four years of college or more; II-two years of college; III--high school; IV--9th grade or less. The possible categories are high level- very narrow range (happy with group I only); high level - narrow range (happy with both groups I and II); high level-wide range (happy with group I and group III and/or IV); medium level-narrow range (happy with group II and/or III); medium level-wide range (happy with groups II and IV, III and IV, or II, III, IV), and low level-narrow range (happy with group IV).

Table 1 shows the parents' range of educational aspirations by the Hollingshead class position for the head of the household.

Insert Table 1 about here

A clear relationship exists between social class and range of educational aspirations (Gamma = .57). The relationship is almost identical when respondent's education alone is used as the measure of social class. Seventy-seven percent of parents in Classes 1-3 have a narrow range of aspirations compared with 23 percent of those in Class 5. Half of those in Class 5 have a wide range compared with 7 percent of those in Classes 1-3. Thus, in the area of educational aspirations the hypothesis is supported--within the lower classes there is a wider range of aspirations than in the middle class. Also the lower-class peak is as high as the middle-class peak while lower-class parents would also be happy with lower levels to a much greater extent than middle-class parents.[12]

The range of aspirations regarding the future occupation of the children was measured by a procedure similar to that used for educational aspirations. The parents were asked, " Now tell me how happy or unhappy you would be if [your child] has the following job when he is grown?" A list of 32 jobs was read and the respondent indicated how happy or unhappy he would be for each one. Several jobs applied to children of both sexes--sales clerk, for example. For some male jobs (bartender) a similar job (waitress) was substituted for female children, and the interviewer chose the job corresponding to the sex of the child for which the parent was answering. These jobs were then categorized according to skill level so that the range of skill levels that the respondent would be happy to have his child enter could be computed. The skill levels used are professional (9 jobs listed), managerial (4), clerical and sales (6), craftsman and operative (6), and service and laborer (7). These have been grouped as follows: I--professional and managerial; II--clerical and sales; III--craftsman and operative; IV--service and laborer. As with educational aspirations nearly all parents would be happy with the highest group so the range almost always includes the high level criterion.

Three criteria have been used to determine if a parent is happy with a particular skill level. The first is that the parent must be happy with one job in the skill level to be considered happy with that skill level. The second is that the parent must be happy with one-third of the jobs in that skill level. The third is that the parent must be happy with one-half of the jobs in the skill level.

As might be expected the percentage of parents with a wide range of aspirations varies considerably according to the criterion used to determine happiness for each skill level. Table 2 shows that if the parent need only be happy with one of the several jobs in each skill

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Insert Table 2 about here

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level then 86 percent would be happy with a wide range of skill levels. If he must be happy with 1/2 of the jobs in each skill level then 38 percent have a wide range and the percent with a narrow range increases from 7 percent to 34 percent.

Table 3 shows the relationship between range of aspirations and social class when the criterion of being happy with 1/2 of the occupations in each skill level is used. The pattern of relationship and the magnitude of the percentage differences are similar for the other two criteria. The relationship is similar for each criterion when respondent's education alone is used as the social class measure.

Insert Table 3 about here

As was the case for educational aspirations, parents in the lower classes (Classes 4 and 5) have higher percentages with wide ranges of aspirations than those in Classes 1-3 (Gamma = .31).

The third area investigated is the income aspirations of parents for their children. The following question was asked of all parents: "I'm going to give you different amounts of money that some people earn each week. Tell me how happy or unhappy you would be if [your child] were earning each of these amounts when he is grown?" The amounts included were up to $60 per week; $60 to $75 per week;

$75 to $100 per week; $100 to $150 per week; $150 to $200 per week; $200 to $250 per week. These income levels have been grouped as follows: I--$200 per week or more; II--$100 - $200 per week; III--$75 - $100 per week; IV--under $75 per week.

Table 4 shows an inverse relationship between social class and range of income aspiration (Gamma =.48).[13] This relationship is similar when respondent's education alone is used as the measure of social class.

Insert Table 4 about here

The previous discussion was based upon a single criterion for defining as aspiration--whether the parent would be happy if his child reached a specific educational, occupational, or income level when he grew up. It is also possible to define an aspiration by using more than one criterion. Three other criteria for educational aspirations will be considered in the future--the parent's feeling that his child has a chance to finish a specific level, the manner in which respondent feels the cost of education should be divided between family and child, and the number of things the respondent would give up so that his child could finish a specific level.

DISCUSSION

Thus the basic hypothesis has been supported for all three areas of aspirations investigated--education, occupation, and income. Social class is inversely related to the width of the range of aspirations. This relationship holds when controls are introduced for sex of the child and sex of the parent, number of children in the family, birthplace of the respondent, employment status of the mother, age of the respondent,

and preschool educational experience of the child. In some subgroups the strength of the relationship varies from that of the total sample but the relationship between social class and range of aspirations cannot be explained by any of these controls.

The results of this hypothesis have several interesting implications which differ from implications of most research on level of aspirations. To the extent that lower-class individuals have a wider range of aspirations, with a peak as high as the middle-class peak, there is a built-in potential for mobility. As improved opportunities become available, the possibility of upward mobility is greater than if lower-class individuals merely have low levels of aspiration. To encourage mobility it would therefore be more important to provide opportunities and to establish a conviction of their attainability than to try to change values or to raise levels of aspiration. Given a wider range of aspirations within the lower class, we expect that increased commitment to higher levels within the range would follow the increased perception of the availability of opportunities.

Footnotes

1. Hyman Rodman, "The Lower-Class Value Stretch," Social Forces, 42 (December, 1963), pp. 205-215.

2. Hyman Rodman, "Illegitimacy in the Caribbean Social Structure: A Reconsideration," American Sociological Review, 31 (October 1966), pp. 673-683.

3. Vaughn J. Crandall, Walter Katkovsky, and Anne Preston, "Motivational and Ability Determinants of Young Children's Intellectual Achievement Behaviors," Child Development, 33 (September 1962), pp. 643-661. Esther S. Battle, "Motivational Determinants of Academic Competence," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 4 (December 1966), pp. 634-642. Julian B. Rotter, Social Learning and Clinical Psychology. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1954.

4. Herbert H. Hyman, "The Value Systems of the Different Classes: A Social Psychological Contribution to the Analysis of Stratification," in Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Martin Lipset, editors, Class, Status, and Power, Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1953, pp. 426-442.

5. William H. Sewell and Vimal P. Shah, "Social Class, Parental Encouragement, and Educational Aspirations," American Journal of Sociology, 73 (March 1968), pp. 559-572.

6. Kurt Lewin et al., "Level of Aspiration," in J. McV. Hunt, editor, Personality and the Behavior Disorders, Vol. 1, New York: The Ronald Press, 1944, p. 335.

7. Samuel Stouffer, "An Analysis of Conflicting Social Norms," American Sociological Review, 14 (December 1949), pp. 707-717.

8. LaMar T. Empey, "Social Class and Occupational Aspiration: A Comparison of Absolute and Relative Measurements," American Sociological Review, 21 (December 1956), pp. 703-709. Richard M. Stephenson, "Mobility Orientation and Stratification of 1,000 Ninth Graders," American Sociological Review, 22 (April 1957), pp. 204-212. Francis G. Caro and C. Terence Pihlblad, "Aspirations and Expectations: A Reexamination of the Bases for Social Class Differences in the Occupational Orientations of Male High School Students," Sociology and Social Research, 49 (July 1965), pp.465-475.

9. Francis G. Caro, "Social Class and Attitudes of Youth Relevant for the Realization of Adult Goals," Social Forces, 44 (June 1966).

10. See Hyman Rodman, "Illegitimacy in the Caribbean Social Structure," op.cit., for a hypothetical account of the sequence as it pertains to attitudes about illegitimacy.

11. August B. Hollingshead, Two Factor Index of Social Position, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957 (mimeograph).

Footnotes (continued)

12. If a respondent answered "very happy" (category 1) for two educational levels in a row the interviewer did not ask the rest of the questions. Therefore it was assumed that if a person were "very happy" with two levels in a row, he would be happy with all remaining higher levels. There were 58 respondents who were "very happy" with high school and junior college and were assumed to be happy with 4 years of college and graduate and professional school. Seventy-six respondents were "very happy" with junior college and 4 years of college and were assumed to be happy with graduate or professional school.

13. If a respondent answered "very happy" (category 1) for two income levels in a row, it was assumed that he would be happy with all higher income levels. Sixteen respondents were "very happy" with $60 to $75 per week and $75 to $100 per week and were assumed to be happy with all higher levels. At each level cases were added where respondents were "very happy" for two levels in a row. At the highest income level 263 cases were assumed to be happy because they had been "very happy" at two previous consecutive levels.

Table 1

RANGE OF EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS BY SOCIAL CLASS
(in percents)

	Social Class			Total Sample
	1-3	4	5	
High level-very narrow range	77	43	23	41
High level-narrow range	16	29	25	25
High level-wide range	7	28	52	34
Total	100	100	100	100
Number of cases	83	151	182	416

Note: Information was not ascertained for 4 respondents. The 14 respondents who were happy with no levels and 2 respondents in the medium level-narrow range category have been omitted.

Table 2

RANGE OF OCCUPATIONAL ASPIRATIONS FOR EACH CRITERION OF HAPPINESS

(in percents)

	Happy with 1 job	Happy with 1/3 of jobs	Happy with 1/2 of jobs
Happy with no levels	1	1	7
High level-very narrow range	7	19	34
High level-narrow range	6	8	21
High level-wide range	86	72	38
Medium level-narrow range	*	*	*
Total	100	100	100
Number of cases	436	436	436

* Less than 1/2 of 1 percent

Table 3

RANGE OF OCCUPATIONAL ASPIRATIONS BY SOCIAL CLASS
(in percents)

	Social Class		
	1-3	4	5
High level-very narrow range	61	37	27
High level-narrow range	20	19	26
High level-wide range	19	44	47
Total	100	100	100
Number of cases	70	153	181

Note: The 31 respondents who were happy with no level according to this criterion were omitted as well as 1 respondent who was in the medium level-narrow range category.

Table 4

RANGE OF INCOME ASPIRATIONS BY SOCIAL CLASS
(in percents)

	Social Class			Total Sample
	1-3	4	5	
High level-very narrow range	51	13	10	20
High level-narrow range	37	56	45	47
High level-wide range	12	41	45	33
Total	100	100	100	100
Number of cases	84	155	186	425

Note: Information was not ascertained for 4 respondents. Seven respondents who were happy with no levels were omitted.